



JOSEPH NECHVATAL 2015-08-09

BOOK REVIEW OF THE POSTHUMAN BY ROSI BRAIDOTTI

BIOPOLITICS, DOCUMENTATION, DELEUZE/GUATTARI, FATHERFUCKING, FEMINISM, POST-FEMINISM, POST-PHILOFICTION MATERIALISM, POSTHUMANISM, VIRACTUAL

Contemporary philosopher and feminist theoretician, Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* is a rather academically heavy book in terms of esoteric cryptic jargon (for some) that skims from Spinoza, Deleuze, Foucault, Latour, Haraway and others. Regardless, it is a rather enthralling Cultural Studies related look into the sometimes frightening, sometimes hysterical, glittering techno-world in which we find ourselves. A world where the distinct individual human is embedded into (and processed by) non-human semi-autonomous software programs. And techno-scientific apparatuses, such as genetically modified food, advanced prosthetics, AI robotics and reproductive technologies (like the recently U.K. approved three way babies). Yet essentially, her's is a generative way of thinking about life and art here and now in our wired anthropocene era. Generative by way of stressing our interactions with nonhuman agency on a planetary scale. The shock effect is one of discovering a poignant nervousness that has been secretly penetrating us everywhere.

Her goal in this book is to establish means of empowerment that sustains subjectivity in light of the specific conditions and relations of power that are imminent to our historical time and place (or non-place). Once Braidotti, a distinguished professor at Utrecht University and founding director of the Centre for the Humanities, disconnects post-naturalistic assumptions of technoculture from prior misleading ideas of masculinist universalism and techno-transcendence (read Ray Kurzweil et al), she starts sketching out a novel form of third gender cosmopolitan neo-humanism. This is built mainly upon (unstated) notions of *Ātman* (let's not parse the Hindu, Buddhist, Jainist varieties here) or Taoist-like environmentalist understandings of immanent non-dualistic vitalist materialism (though Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu are never mentioned). This deep human-environment weave (Spinoza) is tied to post-colonial race and gender studies analysis.

Following the postmodern, the post-colonial, the post-industrial, the post communist and even the much contested post-feminist conditions, Braidotti maintains that we have entered the post-human predicament, and demonstrates it convincingly by stringing together issues that are currently scattered across a number of domains. After putting the reader through a bumpy mutant transsexual post-anthropomorphic ride (that one must relax into), transsexuality and the viral emerge as the two dominant posthuman topos, to my eye. She also is very critical of hegemonic models of violent appropriation and consumption of the 'other' as she explores the extent to which posthumanism displaces the traditional humanistic unity of the subject. She argues that only the posthuman makes sense of the theoretically flexible/multiple identities that we can establish if we like in close contact with the complexities of our "smart" technologies. Those algorithmic technologies that by-pass human decision making (and hence agency) are particularly at the core of her post-anthropocentric turn. One that also joyously combines cosmology and anthropology in the interests of a re-enchantment of the world.

Braidotti's posthumanism stance contains aspects of a neo-humanism that appears to me closely aligned with that found in the new media art that Frank Popper documented in his book *From Technological to Virtual Art* (Leonardo Books, MIT Press, 2007). Where he also offers a model for thinking about humanist art values in a technological age where we are caught up in the spinning machine of the global economy and its digital infotainment environment. But more specifically, Braidotti proposes a new interdisciplinary approach for university humanities studies. One in the interests of a non-dualistic understanding of nature-culture interaction that celebrates and builds upon the historical downfall of androcentric and Eurocentric Humanism.

After pitching against the tenets of neo-liberal individualism, Braidotti sucked me into a fantastic tour-de-force tale of said nature-culture continuum (one that is abysmally deep and inescapably virulent) by developing a post-secular philosophy rejecting nature-culture dualism and stressing, rather, the auto-poietic self-organization of living matter. So her's is a healthy jocular sensuality that is post-secularly spiritual, as it posits a living non-dogmatic vast common link beyond the human ego that embeds us all. But I must stress that Braidotti insists upon a materialist notion of embodiment that de-links human agency from universalistic postures. She points out that this sensual spiritual awareness is blurred and displaced to some extent by technoscience and the steamrolling (so called) free market. A market that has imposed zombified anti-intellectualism on us as a salient

feature of our global era, as contemporary market economies profit from the control and commodification of all life, erasing categorical distinctions between the human and other species, seeds, plants, animals, viruses and bacteria.

After more than convincingly establishing that we already are living as viral posthumans (meaning we humans live with and in both classical humanism and the many anti-humanist liberation movements of her youth), Braidotti's central question is this: What new forms of subjectivity are supported by a posthuman understanding? To answer this, Braidotti finds networks of human and nonhuman actors (Latour) useful as a way of engaging affirmatively with the present. A generative present that help us to rethink our position within our anthropocene era: our interactions with nonhuman agency on a planetary scale. This Braidotti follows with innumerable inquisitive innuendoes concerning the ramifications for a creative and aesthetic posthuman future where different power relations may emerge.

Braidotti also asserts (and demonstrates) the importance of combining theoretical concerns with a serious commitment to producing socially and politically relevant scholarship based in hope. Her posthumanism is clearly not a dystopian rendition of modernist nightmares. But it must be pointed out that *The Posthuman* is also impregnated with some fear and suspicion. Yet I sensed an undeniable affirmative nobility of purpose here, which is to save the cultural condition from both denial and negativity, and to give a brimful push to technology towards ethical values. This admirable redemption is achieved by recalling the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Specifically, Deleuze and Guattari maintained that media ecologies are machinic operations (the term machinic here refers to the production of consistencies between heterogeneous elements) based in particular technological and humane strings that have attained virtual consistency. Our current inter-network ecology is a comparable combination of top-down host arrangements wedded to bottom-up self-organization where invariable linear configurations and states of entanglement co-evolve in active process.

Braidotti recognizes both computer and biological viruses (neither dead nor alive) as the crowning culmination of current postmodern cultural trends (p. 113) – as viruses, by definition, are merger machines based on parasitism and acculturation. They are the aesthetics of transfiguration achieved through embedded dissonance *par excellence*. It is not only their symbolic/metaphoric power that places them firmly in a wider perspective of cultural infection; it is their formal structure, in that they procure their actuality from the encircling environment to which they are receptively coupled. For Braidotti, this leads to a constructive type of pan-humanity that frees us from the mental provincialism and the sectarianism of ideologies. And the dishonesty of grandiose posturing.

Key to her idea of posthumanism are relational but embedded and embodied collectivity and community, full of cultural intermixture within the nature-culture continuum. Her's is a sizzling vitalist inter-connectivity between the human and non-human environment, one embodied and embedded materialistically within the roaring universe of intersecting affective relations. She is big on indicators of raw cosmic energy-life (zoe) as evident in the self-organizing (smart) structure of living neural matter. And she is insistent on a connection between monism and post-anthropocentrism that allows escape from the melancholia of progressive left doxa (common sense belief) into a new ontological relationality: a post-anthropocentric thought that encompass not only other species, but also the sustainability of our planet as a whole. Moreover, Braidotti lucidly demonstrates that posthumanism is indeed the rudimentary underpinning on which contemporary techno culture rests. She astutely anoints the indexical function of posthumanism by establishing not only its symbolic melancholy power in relation to the human body and sex, but by folding the viral life/nonlife model into key cultural areas underlying ecology; such as bottom-up self-organization, hidden distributed activity and ethereal meshwork. In that sense Braidotti describes network ecology as both actual and virtual, what I have elsewhere identified as the *viractual*. (Briefly, the viractual is the stratum of activity where distinct actualizations/individuations are materialized out of the flow of virtuality – conditions and relations of power that are imminent to our historical place.)

I would add to this that her brand of posthumanism, one that integrate science, social and environmental sustainability, technology and globalization, mimics the manneristic aspects of late post-modernism in general. But, significantly, it is relatively free from post-modernist detached irony and delusions of grandeur. Particularly if one sees modernism as still the great petri dish aggregate in which we float. Her insistently heterogeneous posthumanism does not recognize an indexical symptom of a bigger mono cultural tendency that characterize our media culture as being inserted within a modern (purist) digital ecology. This aspect provides the book with a discerning lack of comprehension of the materialism of code within connectionist technologies of contemporaneous techno culture. Thus she misses the theoretical point and techno-cultural relevance of code to posthumanism (and to all cultural production) – something that is evident to anyone who has already recognized that digitalization has become the universal technical platform for networked capitalism. Digitalization has secured its place as the master formal archive for sounds, images and texts. Digitalization is the double, the gangrel, that accompanies each of us in what we do – and which accounts for our cultural feelings of vacillating between anxiety and enthusiasm over being invaded by something invisible – and the sneaky suspicion that we have been taken control of from within.

But *The Posthuman* did plunge me into a haunting, shifting and dislocating array of critical theory source material that also thrilled. Braidotti launches this rather degenerate seduction by drawing from, and intertwining in a non-linear fashion, with the theories of Luce Irigaray, Edward Said, Claire Colebrook, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Tiziana Terranova, N. Katherine Hayles, Lynn Margulis, Luciana Parisi, Manuel De Landa, Cary Wolfe, Brian Massumi, Judith Butler, Bruno Latour, Sherry Turkle, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, and Jane Bennett, among others. The book's genealogical account is impressive, as it devotes satisfactory space to the discussion of the historical precedents of dehumanization, Humanism and anti-Humanism – with an eye

towards a critique of the homogenization of cultures under the effects of globalized advanced capitalism.

But the pinnacle of interest, for me, of this engaging and educative read is its conclusion. Where Braidotti sketches out an alternative radical media-ecological perspective for art (by extenuation) that is hinged on the viral characteristics of self-reproduction and a coupling of the outside with the inside typical of artificial life (a-life). She correctly maintains that viral autopoiesis undertakings (like Thomas S. Ray's *Tierra virtual ecology* art project) provide quintessential clues to interpreting the software logic that has produced, and will continue to produce, the ontological basis for much of the economic, political and cultural transactions of our current globalizing world. Here she has rendered problematic the safe vision of the posthuman as maliciously inhuman(e) and replaced it with a far more curious, aesthetic and even benevolent one. By using viral a-life's tenants of semi-automation, self-reproduction and host embeddedness, Braidotti proposes a living-machinic viral autopoiesis that provides a moebius strip like ontological process for culture. (Scientists have argued about whether viruses are living organisms or just a package of colossal molecules. A virus has to hijack another organism's biological machinery to replicate, which it does by inserting its DNA into a host.) Though suppositional, she bases her procedure in formal viral attributes – not unlike those of primitive artificial life with its capability to self-reproduce and spread semi-autonomously (as viruses do). Keeping in mind that Maturana/Varela's autopoiesis contends that living systems are an integral component of their surroundings and work towards supporting that ecology.

However, I should point out that recent polymorphic viruses are now able to evolve in response to anti-virus behaviors. Various viruses, known as retroviruses, explicitly target anti-virus programs. Retroviruses are sometimes known as anti-anti-viruses. The basic principle is that the virus must somehow hinder the operation of an anti-virus program in such a way that the virus itself benefits from it. Anti-anti-viruses should not be confused with anti-virus-viruses, which are viruses that will disable or disinfect other viruses. Viruses with adaptive behavior, self-reproductive and evolutionary programs can be seen, at least in part, as something alive, even if not artificial life in the strongest sense of the word. Anti-anti-viruses suggest a new way to look for self-styling rational agency in the production of counter-subjectivities useful to art, those which involve complex negotiations with dominant norms and mind opening values.

Here we might recall John Von Neumann's conviction that the ideal design of a computer should be based on the design of certain human organs – or other live organisms. The artistic compositional benefit of Braidotti's autopoiesic viral theory, for me, is in allowing thought and vision to rupture habit and bypass object-subject dichotomies in the interests of a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity.

I wish to point out here that although biological viruses were originally discovered and characterized on the basis of the diseases they caused, most viruses that infect bacteria, plants and animals (including humans) do not cause disease. In fact, viruses may be helpful to life in that they rapidly transfer genetic information from one bacterium to another. And viruses of plants and animals may convey genetic information among similar species. Helping their hosts survive in hostile environments.

Already various theories of diversity and complexity have established an influence within philosophy and cultural theory by emphasizing open systems and adaptability. But Braidotti here supplies a further step in thinking about ongoing feedback loops between an organism and its environment. *The Posthuman's* idea for a creative digital cultural theory focuses on chimerical environmental complexity and inter-connectionism in relationship to the particular (artwork or artist). This web comprehension might become the eventual reference point for culture-at-large in terms of a modification of parameters, as it promotes parasite-host dynamic interfacing of the technologically inert with the biologically animate, probabilistically, artistically, and ethically.

I also detected here an enhanced understanding of pagan and animist sentiment which recognizes non-malicious looping and mutating energy feedback within a self-recreational dynamism that informs new aesthetic becomings. This aesthetic groping may alter artistic output by placing it in a state of eco-political and ethical accountability. A sane place for collective imaginaries and shared aspirations to grow. One of heuristic becomings that transgress the established boundaries of nature/technology/culture and extend cognitive-metabolistic characteristics so as to make art reasonable to discuss as a form of extravagant artificial life (in terms of its salient features): triggered emergence, resilience, and back door evolution.

The Posthuman offers us a chance to identify such aesthetic opportunities by blurring the traditional distinction between the human and its others. This as a form of artistic resistance and empowerment found in de-linking human agency from universalistic postures. Immanent here and now. Such a post-anthropocentric chance for art is suited to the poly-centric structure of contemporary power. One that allows humans to thrive in aesthetic harmony with nature and each other by using a different discursive framework for ethical values. One viscerally opposed to authoritarianism and orthodoxy and the stifling post-secular politicization of religion.

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